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War rape in the face of heroic narrative. The case of Polish cinema

Abstract

War rape seals the status of women as passive victims and excludes them from heroic narratives. Despite women's suffering and their active resistance against the invaders, film representations reduce their subjectivity through a narrative of shame based on silence, exclusion, or the removal of women from the real course of events, all of which dominate in Polish cinema. Phenomena that are highlighted in the text—talking about rape on one's own terms, using it as self-defence, bearing resulting offspring, active resistance or creating an approving community—may become a way to the empowerment of heroines and reformulation of the traditional symbolic field.

Key words: rape, abject, Polish cinema, oral history, women

Piotr Zwierzchowski, in his book on heroic death, writes that “the death of a hero is decidedly a male motive. This is no different in contemporary cinema; it is men who are awarded the right to be heroes and perish in a way full of pathos. The final moments of *Thelma and Louise* are among scarce exceptions confirming the rule”.¹ On the one hand, it seems highly unfair that the author—in his over 200-page-long deliberations dedicated to heroic deaths—acknowledged just one film with female protagonists. On the other, the disproportion between male and female representation signals difficulty

¹ Piotr Zwierzchowski, *Spektakl i ideologia. Szkice o filmowych wyobrażeniach śmierci heroicznej / Spectacle and ideology. Sketches on film conceptions of heroic death*, (Kraków: Rabid) (2006), p. 184.

in associating heroic narrative with female experience.

Even in wartime narratives in Polish cinema, which are seemingly predestined to discuss heroism, the presence of women is troublesome, although “the participation of women in resistance against invaders was much more significant here than in the West”.² Natalia Jarska points out that, in most cases, the female experience does not appear in dominating narratives on war. Even if women are mentioned, these stories are stereotyped and their true experiences often left untold.³ Especially resistant to historical narrative are experiences related to gender, the effect of which is the tendency—both among witnesses and researchers—to bypass the gender category, supposedly to guarantee the universal image of wartime events. “The symbolic allocation and social evaluation of both features («personal» to women; «objective» to men) is not random”⁴ and, as a result, leads to the bypassing of the specifically female experience.

However, it is impossible to attribute rape—the most gender-determined form of wartime violence⁵—solely to the personal sphere, even from the perspective of traditional historical narratives focused on events from the battlefield. On the one hand, rape touches the private realm, while on the other, it is a manner of conducting military operations. “Rape cannot be understood as «just» a deplorable side-effect of war provoked by soldiers’ sexual frustration. Rape is, literally, a weapon of war”.⁶ Hence, according to researchers, it is not only sexual violence, but also sexualized violence, for which satisfying one’s desire is neither the key nor the sole goal.⁷

Treating rape as a tool of war does not mean, however, that this traumatic women’s experience finds its place among heroic narratives. Generally sexual violence reinforces the division into active aggressors symbolically annexing new territories through women, and passive victims colonized by the invaders. Moreover, as noticed by Yana Hashamova: “the predominant Western scholarship on war rapes explores the

² Natalia Jarska, “Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe, ed. Maren Röger, Ruth Leiserowitz (review)”, *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość. Pismo naukowe poświęcone historii najnowszej* 2 (2014), p. 505.

³ Ibid., p. 510

⁴ Bożena Karwowska, “Zatarte sensory prozy łagrowej: Seweryny Szmaglewskiej «Dymy nad Birkenau» wtedy i dziś” / “The blurred senses of labour camp prose: Seweryna Szmaglewska «Smoke over Birkenau» then and now”, in: *(Nie)obecność: pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku / Absence: omissions and concealments in 20th-century narratives*, ed. Hanna Gosk, (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa) (2008), p. 253.

⁵ We rarely encounter war images that present the rape of men (*Kornblumenblau*, 1988, dir. Leszek Wosiewicz). In Polish cinema, we can indicate homosexual or heterosexual survival prostitution (*Kornblumenblau*, 1988, dir. Leszek Wosiewicz) (*Down Carrier*, 1983, dir. Stefan Szlachtycz and *Warsaw: Year 5703*, 1992, dir. Janusz Kijowski) that is related to this experience.

⁶ Bülent Diken, Carsten Bagge Laustsen, “Becoming Abject: Rape as a Weapon of War”, *Body & Society* 1, vol 11 (2005), p. 112.

⁷ Natalia Jarska, op. cit., p. 506.

victimisation of women”.⁸ Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż adds that the reflection of academics corresponds to attempts at remembering rape victims by artists. Examples of artwork analysed by her are representations that show “the woman’s suffering visually subjugated by male aggression. The victim [is] completely dominated by [a] towering soldier figure”.⁹ This method of placing emphasis shows women as passive victims of violence and thus excludes them from heroic narratives usually dominated by active battle.

Perceiving rape as a weapon, however, allows us to focus on its double-edged character. Naturally, this does not signify analogous revenge that female protagonists could take on their oppressors, but it means rape as a tool for protecting your loved ones or yourself. In most cases, film representations do not present women as passive victims devoid of agency, but as active subjects who, in a critical moment, attempt to fight and defend themselves with the means available to civilians and women. Just a glance at the film representations of war rape in Polish cinema allows us to allege that most female protagonists—due to the lack of other means of conducting war—use rape as a way of doing battle. In the films *How to be loved* (1962, dir. Wojciech Jerzy Has), *The Columbuses* (1970, dir. Janusz Morgenstern), *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle* (1992, dir. Andrzej Wajda), *Sekal has to die* (1998, dir. Vladimír Michálek), *Deserter’s Gold* (1998, dir. Janusz Majewski), *Joanna* (2010, dir. Feliks Falk), *Rose* (2011, dir. Wojciech Smarzowski), *Manhunt* (2012, dir. Marcin Krzysztalowicz), and *Life Taken [Zerwany kłós]* (2016, dir. Witold Ludwig), the female protagonists not only fight to save their own lives but act much more heroically—they attempt to save others by scarifying themselves. In this manner, they protect their daughter (*Rose*), a Jewish girl (*Joanna*), a loved one (*How to be loved*, *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*, *Deserter’s Gold*, *The Columbuses*), a sister (*Manhunt*), their family (*Sekal has to die*), their father (*Life Taken*). The female protagonists decide that the rape to which they consent is a lesser tragedy than the death of a loved one.

Paradoxically, however, the raped women, by the very fact of using rape as a tool of battle or survival, do not fulfil the principle desired in the traditional historical narrative of the “ideal Other”, or a victim as a passive subject whose “role comes down to actually being a suffering victim. The system will take care of her and make sure she remains such a victim”.¹⁰ The female protagonist who does not accept full

⁸ Yana Hashamova, “War Rape: (Re)defining Motherhood, Fatherhood and Nationhood”, in: *Embracing Arms: Cultural Representation of Slavic and Balkan Women in War*, ed. Helena Gosciło, (New York: Central European University Press) (2012), p. 235.

⁹ Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż, “War Rape: Trauma and the Ethics of Representation”, in: *Traumatic Memories of the Second World War and After*, ed. Peter Leese, Jason Crouthamel, (New York: Springer International Publishing) (2016), p. 223.

¹⁰ Ewa Domańska, “O poznawczym uprzywilejowaniu ofiary (uwagi metodologiczne)” / “On cognitive privileges of the victim (methodological remarks)”, in: *(Nie)obecność: pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku / Absence: omissions and concealments in 20th-century narratives*, op. cit., p. 32.

victimisation—not only by the oppressor but also by the dominating national narrative—chooses her own salvation or that of her loved ones above chastity, and does not fulfil the role of the “good Other”. In traditional patriotic narratives, this type of sexualized agency disagrees with the status of the unblemished victim and requires further interventions to render it again a symbol of the suffering subject. The acceptance of rape as a form of salvation is problematic in the Polish context as it contradicts the postulate of chastity. Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska mentions this when writing about forced prostitution related to rape presented in *A Year of the Quiet Sun* (1984) by Krzysztof Zanussi. The researcher shows that, in common opinion, “women chose work in the puffs willingly, and were not victims”,¹¹ hence they were undeserving of compassion. Bożena Karwowska writes about this phenomenon in a similar way when describing female camp testimonies. The authors of recollections negatively mark all sexual behaviour and expect prisoners to behave in a way incompatible with the inhumane camp conditions in which, according to them, “women should remain modest and possess a sense of shame”.¹²

Using sexuality as a weapon brings to mind the figure of the biblical Judith, “the heroic liberator of the non-heroic oppressed”,¹³ whose horrendous nature was the result of a scandal consisting in the merger of such contradictions as traditionally female attributes and the ability to commit murder. However, the raped protagonists do not murder their enemies like Judith but, similarly to her, use their sexuality as a weapon. Meanwhile, as Małgorzata Czermińska argues: “in the tradition stemming from Polish romantic thinking, the victim is morally and not cognitively privileged”.¹⁴ Thus, does the female protagonist consenting to rape remain a morally privileged victim in this dominant model of thinking about history?

The impossibility of experiencing rape, surviving, and simultaneously remaining a dignified victim is presented ostentatiously in the 2016 film *Life Taken*, which is dedicated to the blessed Karolina Kózkówna and is clearly addressed to a Catholic audience. In 1914, a Red Army soldier murdered 16-year-old Karolina during a rape

¹¹ Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska, “Ziemia odzyskana – życia utracone. O Roku spokojnego słońca Krzysztofa Zanussiego” / “Reclaimed land – lost life. On *A Year of the Quiet Sun* by Krzysztof Zanussi”, in: *Kino polskie wobec II wojny światowej / Polish cinema and WWII*, ed. Piotr Zwierzchowski, Daria Mazur, Mariusz Guzek, (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego) (2011), p. 223.

¹² Bożena Karwowska, “Zatarte sensory prozy łagrowej...” / “The blurred senses of labour camp prose...”, op. cit., p. 263.

¹³ Hans Mayer, *Outsiders*, trans. Anna Kryczyńska, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie Muza) (2005), p. 75.

¹⁴ Małgorzata Czermińska, “O dwuznaczności sytuacji ofiary” / “On the ambiguity of the victim’s situation”, in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy – konteksty i perspektywy badawcze / Culture that has undergone hardship, people with a past. Polish post-dependence discourse – research contexts and perspectives*, ed. Ryszard Nycz, (Kraków: Universitas) (2011), p. 94.

attempt. After her death, the girl was announced a martyr, she was venerated and later pronounced blessed. The fictional story compares the fate of Karolina with the story of her pregnant neighbour Teresa, who was excluded from the community precisely because of rape. She is simultaneously the victim of a Red Army soldier and of her co-residents who persecute her and consider her to be a slut, as proven by her pregnancy. The film, while aiming to show the magnanimity of Karolina leaning over the victim, accidentally reveals an irreconcilable dichotomy. The title protagonist was blessed because she kept her “virgin’s purity”, defending it desperately until death. Teresa is condemned because she survived the rape, which means that she was not sufficiently determined in her resistance. Hence, the film excludes the innocence of a rape victim, especially one who survived, thus sentencing her to ostracism.

This manner of thinking about sexual violence may be related to the difference between the contemporary understanding of shame and guilt. “Shame [...] pertains to a trait or feature of the person, whereas guilt pertains to an act”,¹⁵ hence only the latter is subject to punishment. “In other times and places, things were not so: religious minorities, heretics, and people with «deviant sexuality» were punished by public shaming without a conviction for any criminal act”.¹⁶ Even though Teresa’s behaviour can hardly be considered a crime, she is punished by public shaming, from which the film distances itself only partially.

Even though not all images of film rape bear such a clear-cut nature, most of them in fact become a story about shame which does not correspond with the heroic narration. “The narrative of the dignified victim and the narrative of shame owing to the victim’s condition are contradictory, their co-existence is almost impossible since they cancel one another out”.¹⁷ Shame characterized by Hanna Gosk refers to complicity, which in this case is reserved for the rape victim as such who experienced it and survived. The female protagonists who use rape as a survival strategy place life above the chastity of victims, thus rendering them accomplices. The elimination of shame as a feature and not an act may take place solely through death, which in turn means absence, thus excluding the possibility of redefining the traditional heroic narrative. Hence, paradoxically, instead of becoming a testimony to heroism, film depictions of rape are a sign of its impossibility both in film diegesis and in social awareness. On the one hand, they show the renouncement of ethical norms and, on the

¹⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) (2004), p. 229.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 176-177.

¹⁷ Hanna Gosk, “(Nie)obecność opowieści o wstydzie w narracji losu polskiego” / “The absence of the story of shame in the narrative of Polish fate”, in: *Kultura po przejęciach, osoby z przeszłością... / Culture that has undergone hardship, people with a past...*, op. cit., p. 90.

other, incompatibility with traditional historical narratives.

Oral history

Ewa Domańska, when analysing the status of a victim who escapes the role of the “ideal Other”, shows that the victim resists victimisation when she has a chance to speak for herself.¹⁸ Owing to their actions as well as to their survivor status, the raped protagonists do not give in to total victimisation, which at least potentially allows them to tell their story.¹⁹ Bożena Karwowska, when writing about the figures of the victim and the survivor, indicates that only the latter has a chance to speak. The author adds that “This is also related to the complex passivity of the victim manifesting itself, for example, in her inability to (rationalize and) verbalize the experience, and thus to the fact that the victim remains mute. Regaining a voice is a survivalist gesture and thus the victim never speaks; only the survivor can speak”.²⁰ By remaining alive, the protagonists have a chance to speak about their experience and build a type of diegetic oral history, which—as Paul Thompson puts it—“can be used to change the focus of history itself and open up new areas of inquiry. [Oral history] can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place”.²¹ Ordinary citizens are called on as witnesses, various positions are presented, and this is a way to tell stories outside of dominant historical discourse. “Witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account”.²² This perspective makes it possible, *inter alia*, to hear women’s voices and stories concerning their specific experience.

Activity based on speaking about one’s experiences restores agency and dignity to the films’ protagonists, and sometimes helps transform traditional historical narratives. Felicja from *How to be loved* attempts to speak, but does not do so publicly.

¹⁸ Ewa Domańska, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁹ Agnieszka Morstin compares *Rose* by Wojciech Smarzowski with *How to be loved* by Wojciech J. Has; she emphasizes the role of the subjective narrative used in the latter film as a strategy for abandoning the victim status. See: Agnieszka Morstin, “Mocne filmy i głębokie kompleksy...” / “Strong Films and Deep Complexes. *Rose* by Wojtek Smarzowski compared with *How to be loved* by Wojciech J. Has”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 77-78 (2012), p. 206.

²⁰ Bożena Karwowska, “«Kult ofiary» w oczach polskich pisarek emigrantek a «kult ocalańca» w refleksji krytycznej na temat dyskursów wyzwolenczych” / “«The cult of the victim» seen by Polish migrant female writers and «the cult of the survivor» in critical reflection on liberation discourses” in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością...* / *Culture that has undergone hardship, people with a past...*, op. cit. p. 327.

²¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (1988), p. 26.

²² Ibid., p. 28.

When answering a question about wartime asked by a random co-traveller to Paris, Felicja involuntarily turns to banality—an easy lie—as if used to the fact that her testimony is usually questioned, as has indeed been the case. First, her friend did not believe her, then the underground movement, then the post-war peer tribunal, and finally “those who considered her a whore”, as disclosed to her with full cruelty by Rawicz, whom she had saved. Meanwhile, the man encountered while travelling does not hesitate to speak directly about the defeats suffered. Teresa is also a film survivor—the raped protagonist of *Life Taken*. The piece begins and ends with her story, which the protagonist—the witness of Karolina’s holiness—tells (which is important) in a locked house. It would seem that this is a woman’s voice about a woman, presenting the common experiences of both protagonists. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her story is followed directly by a commentary—the words of a supra-narrator—explaining how a simple girl like Karolina Kózkówna became the Church’s blessed, revered by many followers. There is no more overwhelming contrast than this between the raped Teresa, who tells her story alone, enclosed within the four walls of her house, and Karolina, who “saved her virginity” and became blessed and praised by the official voice of the Church. Teresa not only does not speak of her own traumatic experience but—similarly to Felicja from *How to be loved*—is subject to trial by the community, which questions her version of events relating to the rape.

A kind of a female film story is also the voice of the protagonist of *The Gateway of Europe* (1999), a film by Jerzy Wójcik that is based on the autobiographical recollections of Zofia Wańkiewiczówna.²³ The protagonist, Zosia, keeps a journal in which she records the events related to her service in a military hospital during WWI. The motive of rape was added to the film by the director, which helps to deprive the protagonists of the status of soldiers for the benefit of the image of victims.²⁴ What seems significant, however, is the choice of a protagonist who would experience rape. The division of between the silent victim (Ira) and the one who gives testimony by writing it down (Zosia) is maintained by the director. The raped one is depicted as a passive victim, and the activity that is writing does not correspond with her status. Zosia, who is appointed the heroine of this story, must remain pure.

The remaining protagonists remain silent. The mother from the series *The House* (1980–2000, dir. Jan Łomnicki), who lives with her adult son, the fruit of rape, does the

²³ The recollections of Zofia Wańkiewiczówna were used by her grandson, Melchior Wańkowicz, to create the short story titled *Hospital in Cichiniczę*. Based on this story, Jerzy Wójcik made the film *The Gateway of Europe*.

²⁴ Elżbieta Ostrowska writes in detail about the adaptive changes and femininity under the rule of nationalist ideology (Elżbieta Ostrowska-Chmura, “Polka – dumny przedmiot pożądania” / “Pole – a proud object of desire”, in: *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim / Sexuality and the Body in Polish Cinema*, ed. Sebastian Jagielski, Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) (2009), p. 139-153).

same. Mietek Pociągło knows about his origins but hides this information, along with his mother, from his uncle. Joanna (the title protagonist of the film by Feliks Falk) also remains silent, accused of intimate relations with a German, and condemned by the community to which she belonged. Her loved ones will never learn that the rape on the protagonist was the price for saving a Jewish child. The discretion, which was to protect the family from the consequences of hiding a Jewish girl, is replaced by shame, excluding the protagonist from both the family and the national community. It is important that it was not the rape itself, but the feeling of shame caused by the condemnation of the community with which Joanna identified that pushed the protagonist toward suicide.

The raped nuns from the Polish-French co-production titled *The Innocents* (*Les Innocentes*, 2016, dir. Anne Fontaine) also remain silent due to the trauma they experienced and the fear of social degradation. Maryśka, the only one to know about the rape of her sister, is forced into silence by the protagonists of *God's Lining* (1997–1998). Anusia dies of diphtheria, but in her family's memory she must remain untouched: good, profoundly religious, and pure. Immediately after the rape, Anusia forces her sister to remain silent precisely due to the expectations of the community, saying: "Say nothing to anyone or I will cut out your tongue". Right after that she surprisingly abandons her role of victim by adding: "Don't tremble like that. You won't die from it". Hence, what proves more important than the rape itself is the seemingly justified fear of its discovery by the family. When, following her sister's death and against her will, Maryśka attempts to speak about the rape, she is told off by another sister, Józia: "You invented all of the dirty and disgusting story. Don't breathe a word of this to our parents. She was pure and she died pure. Like a saint".

The obligation to remain silent means that the experience of rape becomes neither a heroic narrative nor an alternative narrative in the face of traditional male depictions. Even when, in *How to be loved* or *Life Taken*, the protagonists speak for themselves, they do so in isolation, thus making it impossible to include these experiences in a shared narrative. Despite the support in Has's film for the silent heroism of Felicja, this image also becomes a representation of secrecy and experience of shame, which in fact excludes a dignified victim. Even though the protagonists do not submit to passive victimisation—they battle and survive—they are finally punished for that three times: by the oppressor, by the film community, and by the inability to exist in the national heroic narrative. The silence seals their status as victims and thus repeats the gesture of the oppressor.

Children of war

A visible sign of the said silence is the lack of representation of the progeny originating

from war rapes, survival prostitution, or even illegal relationships with the enemy. In its extensive comments on events related to the 20th century wars, Polish cinema very rarely tackled the subject of the consequences of forced sexual relations. This inability was visualized in the film *The Innocents*, in which the trace of rape in the form of pregnancy is erased by a prioress in subsequent acts of child murders, which represents in caricature the aforementioned principle that chastity is more important for society than human life. As argued by Yana Hashamova, maternity is not only the area in which the activity of raped women is revealed, but also a chance to overcome victim status by “taking control over their lives”,²⁵ hence the absence of this topic makes the objectification of victims easier.

Even though intimate relations between the invaders and the invaded were a part of everyday life during the war, according to Maren Roger: “predominantly German–French intimate war relations exist in Europe’s historical awareness”.²⁶ This topic has been particularly poorly elaborated by historians in reference to Poland, exacerbated by serious restrictions threatening both men and women in the case of breaching of the race-mixing ban. Polish women deciding on prostitution in order to survive risked more since, for such acts, “they could receive both serious punishment from the invaders and experience ostracism from compatriots”.²⁷ The effect is a lack of testimonies, historical research, and images dedicated to these types of relations and their consequences, i.e. war children.

Aside from the aforementioned series (*The House*), war children were presented in two films: the religious *Life Taken* and *The Innocents*, both of which are removed from the Polish context. In the first film, maternity is reduced to an almost surreal fantasy. Teresa, a raped single mother excluded from the community, watches a rosy, well-fed child playing in a plush illuminated room. The child born from rape was reduced to a pathetic poster promoting maternity without any regard for social context. The film avoids answering the question of social ostracism, the poverty of the protagonist, her loneliness (Teresa is an orphan), and the psychological consequences of the sexual violence she experienced. It confirms the isolation of the mother and child, showing the protagonist enclosed within the walls of the house. Even after Kozakówna’s intercession, Teresa (as she is impure) keeps at a certain distance from other mourners

²⁵ Yana Hashamova, op. cit., p. 235.

²⁶ Maren Roger, “(Nie)codziennosc podczas niemieckiej okupacji w zachodniej i wschodniej Europie: prostytutka, stosunki intymne i «dzieci wojny» we Francji, Belgii i w Polsce” / „(Not)everyday life during German occupation in Western and Eastern Europe: prostitution, intimate relations and “war children” in France, Belgium and Poland”, trans. Katarzyna Chimiak, in: *Okupowana Europa. Podobieństwa i różnice / Occupied Europe. Similarities and differences*, ed. Waldemar Grabowski, (Warszawa: IPN) (2014), p. 77.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

forming the funeral procession.

The Polish–French co-production *The Innocents* shows the progeny of rape whose identity, nevertheless, remains secret. The film is divided into the French perspective, i.e. represented by the main protagonist Mathilde Beaulieu, bravely fighting for the partial opening of the convent to the world to save the pregnant nuns and the children being born there. The protagonist risks her life and is close to rape, but is spared since this fact would not correspond with the heroic narrative reserved for her. The Polish perspective equals silent Polish nuns, who are ready to sacrifice their lives and the lives of their children in order to contain the shame within four walls. On the one hand, the film introduces themes absent in Polish cinema, such as war children; its title emphasizes the fundamental problem the victims struggle with, it supports life (not sexual purity) and, above all, it includes the children of nuns in the social tissue. The nuns are freed from the burden of shame with a trick: hiding the progeny of rape among war orphans taken in by the convent. In the final scene, the children, the nuns, and their families create an idyllic community, although once again it is at the price of silence. On the other hand, rape and its consequences in the form of maternity concern only Polish women, placing them on the side of silent victims. They are freed by an active French heroine from the Red Cross who, like the director, Anne Fontaine, breaks the silence. Thus, the film consolidates the stereotypical division of almost colonial character into the passive, submissive, silent, “raped” East, and the active, heroic West.

The lack of images of maternity resulting from rape stems from the tendency to eliminate the suffering of women from authentic history by taking away their specific future—the actual continuation of their lives—for the benefit of symbolic representations. This tendency corresponds with the phenomenon that Elżbieta Ostrowska wrote about when analysing the death of women on screen. The protagonists described by the author are removed, in film, “from the realm of historical experience into the realm of the mythic”.²⁸ The second reason for the reluctance to represent war children is the consolidation, through their presence, of abject relations. Julia Kristeva defines abject as something that “disturbs identity, system, and order that does not respect borders, positions, and rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”.²⁹ In the war child, the line between what belongs to the national symbolic community and what threatens its identity becomes blurred. Moreover, “perverse interspace”³⁰ combines with the feminine, the woman's body, fertilized by the enemy, which constitutes a threat to the symbolic order of the father.

The child remains a trace of abject contamination, and its status is emphasized

²⁸ Elżbieta Ostrowska, “Invisible Deaths: Polish Cinema’s Representation of Women in World War II”, in: *Embracing Arms...*, op cit., p. 56.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror. An essay of abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press) (1982), p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

by the conviction of inheriting the biological features of the enemy. Even though Mietek Pociągło, the protagonist of *The House* series is an oppositionist dedicated to Poland, as a rape child from the era of the Warsaw Uprising he becomes an exceptionally talented Germanist as if he'd been genetically determined and inherited the linguistic competence of the unknown father in his DNA. The protagonist's origins are in fact the reason for his inferiority complex; he considers himself a foundling even towards those whose fathers are communist dignitaries.

As Danish researchers note: "War rape aims to devalue the women and thus the wealth of the men. A precious object is turned into an abject".³¹ The authors point out that expelling the raped woman from the community becomes a necessity, for she threatens the order of the community she belonged to.³² "He spoiled my woman" is what the protagonist of *Rose* says about his raped wife, on the one hand indicating the irreversible impurity attributed to the protagonist and, on the other, thinking of his raped wife as an object. The heroine becomes guilty twice: according to ethical principles (through the loss of sexual purity), and in relation to social norms (because she divided the community).

When defining "abject", Kristeva refers to Lacan's psychoanalysis and points out that it is precisely "on account of that Other, a space becomes demarcated, separating the abject from what will be a subject".³³ As discussed above, the decision of the heroines to remain silent is an act of submitting to the requirements of Lacan's Other—the Law, the Name of the Father—and adopting an attitude that will remove the troublesome abject from the field of view. In the films discussed, the distracted observing gaze of the Big Other takes the form of constant control over the characters by "their own people"—by members of their community. Hiding in their homes, Joanna (*Joanna*) and Felicja (*How to be loved*) are continuously bothered not only by the Germans, but also by the gaze of their neighbours, family, representatives of underground organisations, and peer courts, which become an emanation of the power of the Other.

The recalled abject dimension was perversely emphasized in the film by Has, *How to be loved*. Felicja's experience is juxtaposed with the heroic fate of the man encountered on her journey. During the war, as a pilot he flew high, as opposed to the "mundane" battle of Felicja who—as she claims—was not made to fly. Moreover, the contrast between sublimity and dirt is emphasized by the man's profession: he is an

³¹ Bülent Diken, Carsten Bagge Laustsen, op. cit., p. 117.

³² Ibid.

³³ Julia Kristeva, op. cit., p. 10.

epidemiologist, a specialist in the prevention of contagious diseases.

Erasing

Erasing offspring is solely a consequence or side effect of removing abject protagonists and cleansing the historical narrative. The disappearance has either a symbolic (in the form of silence or isolation) or physical dimension (death), which is also subject to the principle of absence since, according to Elżbieta Ostrowska, cinema avoids representations of women's deaths on screen.³⁴ Joanna (*Joanna*) dissolves in the Tatra mist, where she will surely freeze to death. Biedronka (*Warsaw '44*) and Niteczka (*The Columbuses*) die out of frame. Rose disappears: first she is moved to the private sphere where Tadeusz takes care of her, and later she dies.

The abject is expelled beyond the symbolic and social order that is responsible for identity and order and becomes subject to the law of the symbolic Other.³⁵ Its principles are reproduced through depictions and methods of describing historical events in which the given community recognizes itself. Rape, as an abject, while seeking its position in the symbolic order, becomes part of this order under two paradoxical conditions. The first of these corresponds to Lacan's order of metonymy, i.e. striving to evade the forbidden object (abject) and multiply its depictions as if in its stead. The metonymy principle, which remains outside of symbolic depiction, corresponds to absence, concealment, and lack. Another mode of expression is transforming the unwanted object into a metaphor. In historical narratives, which are strongly subjected to a patriarchal dictate, this figure is responsible for the disempowerment of women and of the deprivation of their agency. They are thus limited to metaphors: instruments that humiliate the national community, means of the symbolic castration of its male representatives or, at best, symbols of the tortured homeland. For all these reasons, women are reduced in the symbolical order to the role of passive, disempowered victims.

The order of metonymy multiplies representations according to the principle of adding or speaking "instead of", because "the Other (...) continues to resist the speaking subject, throws a spanner in its works".³⁶ Metonymical multiplication characterizes *Life Taken* as it depicts the fates of two women of which only the suffering of one deserves holiness, while the other is isolated and stigmatized with shame. As Felicja from *How to*

³⁴ See Elżbieta Ostrowska, "Invisible Deaths...", op. cit., p. 30.

³⁵ Jean Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *Słownik psychoanalizy / Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Ewa Modzelewska, Ewa Wojciechowska, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne) (1996), p. 317.

³⁶ Paweł Dybel, *Urwane Ścieżki. Przybyszeński-Freud-Lacan / Broken Paths. Przybyszeński-Freud-Lacan*, (Kraków: Universitas) (2000), p. 268.

be loved says, the protagonists who have suffered trauma “hide behind the decorations” so their place can be taken by those who possess features more appropriate for the collective narrative. Rose saves her daughter from rape; she will marry Tadeusz at the altar and give herself into his care. Zosia from *The Gateway of Europe* remains pure, solely becoming a witness to Ira’s suffering. In *Manhunt*, the sexually abused Pestka, betrayer of the insurgents, saves her younger sister, a 16-year-old imprisoned by the Gestapo for distributing leaflets. According to Nancy Isenberg, “the creation of true womanhood is always contrasted to the countervailing notion of female vice: submission is contrasted to superiority, piety to heresy and irreligion, purity to pollution, and domesticity to disorderly public behaviour”.³⁷ Thus, the traumatized female body is replaced with one that guarantees the retention of national order and community.

The metonymical replacement also allows us to replace the image of the raped with the image of a suffering man or his heroic act. In *Rose*, the death of the protagonist and the rapes she experiences become the reason for Tadeusz’s suffering and stimulus to show his indomitable attitude. In *Life Taken*, despite the martyr’s death of Kózkówna and the rape of Teresa, it is the suffering of the blessed’s father that takes the central place in the film and is exposed in its final sequences. In *The Columbuses*, Niteczka sacrifices herself for the boy called Kolumb and, in order to keep him alive, pursues the rapist. After a montage cut, Kolumb, woken from delirium, crawls up the stairs to escape the basement in which Niteczka had hidden him. Instead of her suffering we have a scene reminiscent of the path to Golgotha, at the end of which the protagonist finds the girl’s dead body. The rape scene (or rather its suggestion) in *Warsaw ’44* has a similar structure. Following the scene in which a repugnant pervert, a member of the Dirlewanger brigade, inspects Biedronka from head to toe, there is a cut to the part dedicated to Stefan’s escape across the destroyed city and his dramatic reaction to the girl’s death. The story ends with the vision of the boy (who likely survived) recalling the image of the already dead protagonist. We can also find similar metonymical theft in *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*, in which the rape of Wiśka leads to the death of one of her defenders. Instead of the protagonist’s story, we are presented the story of the impact of her sacrifice and indomitability on her beloved, while she herself appears as Marcin’s vision and a prick of conscience. In *Sekal has to die*, despite the film’s criticism of the degeneration of the patriarchal system, it is the suffering of Sekal, who is in love with Agnieszka, that is exposed—not the suffering of the girl who is raped upon his

³⁷ Nancy Isenberg, “Second Thoughts on Gender and Women’s History”, *American Studies* 1, vol. 36 (1995), p. 99.

orders behind closed doors.

Metaphor

The figure of the metaphor, consisting in intensification and juxtaposition of sense, includes the female protagonists in the symbolic order, i.e. the traditional historical narrative. They are reduced to a symbol; they disappear in the allegory taken from religious repertoire. According to Hans Mayer, “Theological allegoresis and allegorical meaning relegate history. (...) Allegorisation means the annihilation of the individual”.³⁸ Protagonists subjected to metaphysical transgression and religious purification are transformed into religious allegory (*The Gateway of Europe, Joanna*), or the desexualized figure of a mother (*The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*). In *Joanna*, the protagonist actively fights for survival, but her sublimity is ensured by the final scene (stylized as the Assumption)³⁹ in which the protagonist becomes a victim—silent, hounded, disappearing into the whiteness of the clouds. Ira from *The Gateway of Europe* is returned to her friends on a horse after the rape, clothed in a red robe. On the one hand, the red of the coat reminds us of a courtesan’s clothes, on the other, of the scarlet coat of Christ insulted by Jews.⁴⁰ In both films, the protagonists are reduced to victims and disarmed, but in the religious context their images hide a certain contradiction: apart from her sublimity, Joanna is also a suicide, and Ira’s naked breast becomes the source of her shame and degradation.

The same religious context is also offered to raped protagonists by purification through desexualisation and transformation in the allegory of maternity. This principle works, among others, in *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*, *Life Taken*, or *The Columbuses*, as often noted by researchers analysing the presence of women in historical narratives.⁴¹ The escape from sexuality, however, makes it impossible to deliberate upon sexual violence and pushes it into the sphere of silence.

At the same time, however, the films discussed here present a feminine version of heroism that, in spite of the aforementioned operations, does not merely realize the victim model. At the centre of the cited stories are women who are heroic, active, and who resist the enemy, marking their presence in the historical narrative. This aspect is often overlooked due to the aforementioned strategies that downgrade female

³⁸ Hans Mayer, op. cit., p. 74 and 77.

³⁹ The vertical direction can be found also in such films as: *The Ring with a Crowned Eagle*, *The Columbuses*, *Life Taken*.

⁴⁰ Elżbieta Ostrowska describes this scene as “a feminine allegory of Poland”. See: Elżbieta Ostrowska-Chmura, „Polka – dumny przedmiot...” / „Pole – a proud object...”, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴¹ See Ewa Mazierska, Elżbieta Ostrowska, *Women in Polish Cinema*, (New York: Berghahn Books) (2006), p. 15-54.

protagonists as part of the community story. Analysing the masochism of female protagonists (and potential female viewers) that dominates in film melodramas, Linda Williams pointed out that it is possible to interpret films in this genre oppositely to the victim pattern inscribed in them. According to the researcher, the pathos contained in the films does not merely lead to identification with the victim and her masochism, but is also an encouragement to “a complex negotiation between emotion and thought”.⁴² War narratives with women in lead roles also welcome critical reception rather than simply identifying oneself with the position of a victim. The resistance that the female protagonists of traditional historical stories put up in spite of everything may end up forming an introduction to their taking a place in the heroic narrative, provided that the symbolic field of these stories is reformulated.

Without shame

In one of the scenes from *How to be loved*, the German officer shows the café employees a wanted notice which threatens anybody hiding a fugitive with the death penalty. Special words addressed to Felicja are “I would like to emphasize that, according to what is written here, you are also a person”. This short exchange underscores the relationship between subjectivity and agency. As much as the protagonist maintains her subjectivity, the context in which she has to act brings her—as she says—respect in her eyes only.

The analysed films rarely present a semblance of community which would also enable privileges from the creators of collective memory. In *The Gateway of Europe*, it is the group of sympathetic nuns who wash their raped friend together. We can perceive this simply as a symbolic ritual, or as an emphatic community that is unhindered by shame. In *The Innocents*, the women create a support group with various opinions and life goals, which—as the film suggests—allows them to abandon their traumatic experience and find acceptance in the group. Also, Felicja appeals to the community, reaching a wide audience each week through her radio program. She works on social awareness, correcting on her own the radio drama scripts by referring to her personal experiences. Instead of condemning an illegitimate child (as in the script), she points to the common nature of such events. Another voice addressed to the public is the memoirs of Ola Watowa concerning her exile to Kazakhstan during WWII, which were adapted by Robert Gliński in *All That Really Matters...* (1992).

Surpassing the story of shame is the condition for heroic narrative and hence the need for the creation of an alternative collective memory based on an accepting community which would award heroines instead of seeking religious redemption for

⁴² Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revisited”, in: *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. N. Browne, (Berkeley: University of California Press) (1998), p. 49.

them. Thus, the victim status would not degrade female protagonists and would not mark them with shame. In the Polish symbolic field, a raped woman is subject to very strong victimisation; hence, it is impossible to avoid analytical thought focused on this particular aspect. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to the elements that give empowerment and agency back to the victims: using rape as self-defence or with the intention of saving a loved one, active participation in the battle, talking about the rape on their own terms, bearing offspring, creating an accepting and empathic community, or even the status of the abject, which undermines the dominant symbolic narrative. All these aspects fail to meet the criteria that traditional historical stories require of women, hence the problem with their expression in the aforementioned depictions. In spite of victimising and disempowering film strategies, the presence of the abovementioned motifs—even if only partial—may show the direction for future depictions. Leaving the sphere of privacy, referring to the authenticity of experience, or accepting agency free from punishment: all are a path toward appreciating the specifically female experience. The process of co-creating the story of the past, in which sexual violence would not degrade its victims, is a long one because it assumes the evolution of all actors involved in the undertaking, which is involved in building a collective memory.

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